

## Kiss me again, Stranger

I looked around for a bit, after leaving the army and before settling down, and then I found myself a job up Hampstead way, in a garage it was, at the bottom of Haverstock Hill near Chalk Farm, and it suited me fine. I'd always been one for tinkering with engines, and in REME that was my work and I was trained to it - it had always come easy to me, anything mechanical.

My idea of having a good time was to lie on my back in my greasy overalls under a car's belly, or a lorry's, with a spanner in my hand, working on some old bolt or screw, with the smell of oil about me, and someone starting up an engine, and the other chaps around clattering their tools and whistling. I never minded the smell or the dirt. As my old Mum used to say when I'd be that way as a kid, mucking about with a grease can, 'It won't hurt him, it's clean dirt,' and so it is, with engines.

The boss at the garage was a good fellow, easy-going, cheerful, and he saw I was keen on my work. He wasn't much of a mechanic himself, so he gave me the repair jobs, which was what I liked.

I didn't live with my old Mum - she was too far off, over Shepperton way, and I saw no point in spending half the day getting to and from my work. I like to be handy, have it on the spot, as it were. So I had a bedroom with a couple called Thompson, only about ten minutes' walk away from the garage. Nice people, they were. He was in the shoe business, cobbler I suppose he'd be called, and Mrs Thompson cooked the meals and kept the house for him over the shop. I used to eat with them, breakfast and supper - we always had a cooked supper - and being the only lodger I was treated as family.

I'm one for routine. I like to get on with my job, and then when the day's work's over settle down to a paper and a smoke and a bit of music on the wireless, variety or something of the sort, and then turn in early. I never had much use for girls, not even when

I was doing my time in the army. I was out in the Middle East, too, Port Said and that.

No, I was happy enough living with the Thompsons, carrying on much the same day after day, until that one night, when it happened. Nothing's been the same since. Nor ever will be. I don't know...

The Thompsons had gone to see their married daughter up at Highgate. They asked me if I'd like to go along, but somehow I didn't fancy barging in, so instead of staying home alone after leaving the garage I went down to the picture palace, and taking a look at the poster saw it was cowboy and Indian stuff - there was a picture of a cowboy sticking a knife into the Indian's guts. I like that - proper baby I am for westerns - so I paid my one and twopence and went inside. I handed my slip of paper to the usherette and said, 'Back row, please,' because I like sitting far back and leaning my head against the board.

Well, then I saw her. They dress the girls up no end in some of these places, velvet tams and all, making them proper guys. They hadn't made a guy out of this one, though. She had copper hair, page-boy style I think they call it, and blue eyes, the kind that look short-sighted but see further than you think, and go dark by night, nearly black, and her mouth was sulky-looking, as if she was fed up, and it would take someone giving her the world to make her smile. She hadn't freckles, nor a milky skin, but warmer than that, more like a peach, and natural too. She was small and slim, and her velvet coat - blue it was - fitted her close, and the cap on the back of her head showed up her copper hair.

I bought a programme - not that I wanted one, but to delay going in through the curtain - and I said to her, 'What's the picture like?'

She didn't look at me. She just went on staring into nothing, at the opposite wall. 'The knifing's amateur,' she said, 'but you can always sleep.'

I couldn't help laughing. I could see she was serious though. She wasn't trying to have me on or anything.

'That's no advertisement,' I said. 'What if the manager heard you?'

Then she looked at me. She turned those blue eyes in my direction, still fed-up they were, not interested, but there was something in them I'd not seen before, and I've never seen it since, a kind of laziness like someone waking from a long dream and glad to find you there. Cat's eyes have that gleam sometimes, when you stroke them, and they purr and curl themselves into a ball and let you do anything you want. She looked at me this way a moment, and there was a smile lurking somewhere behind her mouth if you gave it a chance, and tearing my slip of paper in half she said, 'I'm not paid to advertise. I'm paid to look like this and lure you inside.'

She drew aside the curtains and flashed her torch in the darkness. I couldn't see a thing. It was pitch black, like it always is at first until you get used to it and begin to make out the shapes of the other people sitting there, but there were two great heads on the screen and some chap saying to the other, 'If you don't come clean I'll put a bullet through you,' and somebody broke a pane of glass and a woman screamed.

'Looks all right to me,' I said, and began groping for somewhere to sit.

She said, 'This isn't the picture, it's the trailer for next week,' and she flicked on her torch and showed me a seat in the back row, one away from the gangway.

I sat through the advertisements and the news reel, and then some chap came and played the organ, and the colours of the curtains over the screen went purple and gold and green - funny, I suppose they think they have to give you your money's worth - and looking around I saw the house was half empty - and I guessed the girl had been right, the big picture wasn't going to be much, and that's why nobody much was there.

Just before the hall went dark again she came sauntering down the aisle. She had a tray of ice-creams, but she didn't even bother to call them out and try and sell them. She could have been walking in her sleep, so when she went up the other aisle I beckoned to her.

'Got a sixpenny one?' I said.

She looked across at me. I might have been something dead under her feet, and then she must have recognized me, because

that half-smile came back again, and the lazy look in the eye, and she walked round the back of the seats to me.

'Wafer or cornet?' she said.

I didn't want either, to tell the truth. I just wanted to buy something from her and keep her talking.

'Which do you recommend?' I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Cornets last longer,' she said, and put one in my hand before I had time to give her my choice.

'How about one for you too?' I said.

'No thanks,' she said, 'I saw them made.'

And she walked off, and the place went dark, and there I was sitting with a great sixpenny cornet in my hand looking a fool. The damn thing slopped all over the edge of the holder, spilling on to my shirt, and I had to ram the frozen stuff into my mouth as quick as I could for fear it would all go on my knees, and I turned sideways, because someone came and sat in the empty seat beside the gangway.

I finished it at last, and cleaned myself up with my pocket handkerchief, and then concentrated on the story flashing across the screen. It was a western all right, carts lumbering over prairies, and a train full of bullion being held to ransom, and the heroine in breeches one moment and full evening dress the next. That's the way pictures should be, not a bit like real life at all; but as I watched the story I began to notice the whiff of scent in the air, and I didn't know what it was or where it came from, but it was there just the same. There was a man to the right of me, and on my left were two empty seats, and it certainly wasn't the people in front, and I couldn't keep turning round and sniffing.

I'm not a great one for liking scent. It's too often cheap and nasty, but this was different. There was nothing stale about it, or stuffy, or strong; it was like the flowers they sell up in the West End in the big flower shops before you get them on the barrows - three bob a bloom sort of touch, rich chaps buy them for actresses and such - and it was so darn good, the smell of it there, in that murky old picture palace full of cigarette smoke, that it nearly drove me mad.

At last I turned right round in my seat, and I spotted where it came from. It came from the girl, the usherette; she was leaning

on the back board behind me, her arms folded across it.

'Don't fidget,' she said. 'You're wasting one and twopence. Watch the screen.'

But not out loud, so that anyone could hear. In a whisper, for me alone. I couldn't help laughing to myself. The cheek of it! I knew where the scent came from now, and somehow it made me enjoy the picture more. It was as though she was beside me in one of the empty seats and we were looking at the story together.

When it was over, and the lights went on, I saw I'd sat through the last showing and it was nearly ten. Everyone was clearing off for the night. So I waited a bit, and then she came down with her torch and started squinting under the seats to see if anybody had dropped a glove or a purse, the way they do and only remember about afterwards when they get home, and she took no more notice of me than if I'd been a rag which no one would bother to pick up.

I stood up in the back row, alone - the house was clear now - and when she came to me she said, 'Move over, you're blocking the gangway,' and flashed about with her torch, but there was nothing there, only an empty packet of Player's which the cleaners would throw away in the morning. Then she straightened herself and looked me up and down, and taking off the ridiculous cap from the back of her head that suited her so well she fanned herself with it and said, 'Sleeping here tonight?' and then went off, whistling under her breath, and disappeared through the curtains.

It was proper maddening. I'd never been taken so much with a girl in my life. I went into the vestibule after her, but she had gone through a door to the back, behind the box-office place, and the commissionaire chap was already getting the doors to and fixing them for the night. I went out and stood in the street and waited. I felt a bit of a fool, because the odds were that she would come out with a bunch of others, the way girls do. There was the one who had sold me my ticket, and I dare say there were other usherettes up in the balcony, and perhaps a cloak-room attendant too, and they'd all be giggling together, and I wouldn't have the nerve to go up to her.

In a few minutes, though, she came swinging out of the place

alone. She had a mac on, belted, and her hands in her pockets, and she had no hat. She walked straight up the street, and she didn't look to right or left of her. I followed, scared that she would turn round and see me off, but she went on walking, fast and direct, staring straight in front of her, and as she moved her copper page-boy hair swung with her shoulders.

Presently she hesitated, then crossed over and stood waiting for a bus. There was a queue of four or five people, so she didn't see me join the queue, and when the bus came she climbed on to it, ahead of the others, and I climbed too, without the slightest notion where it was going, and I couldn't have cared less. Up the stairs she went with me after her, and settled herself in the back seat, yawning, and closed her eyes.

I sat myself down beside her, nervous as a kitten, the point being that I never did that sort of thing as a rule and expected a rocket, and when the conductor stumped up and asked for fares I said, 'Two sixpennies, please,' because I reckoned she would never be going the whole distance and this would be bound to cover her fare and mine too.

He raised his eyebrows - they like to think themselves smart, some of these fellows - and he said, 'Look out for the bumps when the driver changes gear. He's only just passed his test.' And he went down the stairs chuckling, telling himself he was no end of a wag, no doubt.

The sound of his voice woke the girl, and she looked at me out of her sleepy eyes, and looked too at the tickets in my hand - she must have seen by the colour they were sixpennies - and she smiled, the first real smile I had got out of her that evening, and said without any sort of surprise, 'Hullo, stranger.'

I took out a cigarette, to put myself at ease, and offered her one, but she wouldn't take it. She just closed her eyes again, to settle herself to sleep. Then, seeing there was no one else to notice up on the top deck, only an Air Force chap in the front slopped over a newspaper, I put out my hand and pulled her head down on my shoulder, and got my arm round her, snug and comfortable, thinking of course she'd throw it off and blast me to hell. She didn't though. She gave a sort of laugh to herself, and settled down like as if she might have been in an armchair, and

she said, 'It's not every night I get a free ride and a free pillow. Wake me at the bottom of the hill, before we get to the cemetery.'

I didn't know what hill she meant, or what cemetery, but I wasn't going to wake her, not me. I had paid for two sixpennies, and I was darn well going to get value for my money.

So we sat there together, joggling along in the bus, very close and very pleasant, and I thought to myself that it was a lot more fun than sitting at home in the bed-sit reading the football news, or spending an evening up Highgate at Mr and Mrs Thompson's daughter's place.

Presently I got more daring, and let my head lean against hers, and tightened up my arm a bit, not too obvious-like, but nicely. Anyone coming up the stairs to the top deck would have taken us for a courting couple.

Then, after we had had about fourpenny-worth, I got anxious. The old bus wouldn't be turning round and going back again, when we reached the sixpenny limit; it would pack up for the night, we'd have come to the terminus. And there we'd be, the girl and I, stuck out somewhere at the back of beyond, with no return bus, and I'd got about six bob in my pocket and no more. Six bob would never pay for a taxi, not with a tip and all. Besides, there probably wouldn't be any taxis going.

What a fool I'd been not to come out with more money. It was silly, perhaps, to let it worry me, but I'd acted on impulse right from the start, and if only I'd known how the evening was going to turn out I'd have had my wallet filled. It wasn't often I went out with a girl, and I hate a fellow who can't do the thing in style. Proper slap-up do at a Corner House - they're good these days with that help-yourself service - and if she had a fancy for something stronger than coffee or orangeade, well, of course as late as this it wasn't much use, but nearer home I knew where to go. There was a pub where my boss went, and you paid for your gin and kept it there, and could go in and have a drink from your bottle when you felt like it. They have the same sort of racket at the posh night clubs up West, I'm told, but they make you pay through the nose for it.

Anyway, here I was riding a bus to the Lord knows where, with my girl beside me - I called her 'my girl' just as if she really

was and we were courting - and bless me if I had the money to take her home. I began to fidget about, from sheer nerves, and I fumbled in one pocket after another, in case by a piece of luck I should come across a half-crown, or even a ten-bob note I had forgotten all about, and I suppose I disturbed her with all this, because she suddenly pulled my ear and said, 'Stop rocking the boat.'

Well, I mean to say . . . It just got me. I can't explain why. She held my ear a moment before she pulled it, like as though she were feeling the skin and liked it, and then she just gave it a lazy tug. It's the kind of thing anyone would do to a child, and the way she said it, as if she had known me for years and we were out picnicking together, 'Stop rocking the boat.' Chummy, matey, yet better than either.

'Look here,' I said, 'I'm awfully sorry, I've been and done a darn silly thing. I took tickets to the terminus because I wanted to sit beside you, and when we get there we'll be turned out of the bus, and it will be miles from anywhere, and I've only got six bob in my pocket.'

'You've got legs, haven't you?' she said.

'What d'you mean, I've got legs?'

'They're meant to walk on. Mine were,' she answered.

Then I knew it didn't matter, and she wasn't angry either, and the evening was going to be all right. I cheered up in a second, and gave her a squeeze, just to show I appreciated her being such a sport - most girls would have torn me to shreds - and I said, 'We haven't passed a cemetery, as far as I know. Does it matter very much?'

'Oh, there'll be others,' she said. 'I'm not particular.'

I didn't know what to make of that. I thought she wanted to get out at the cemetery stopping point because it was her nearest stop for home, like the way you say, 'Put me down at Woolworth's' if you live handy. I puzzled over it for a bit, and then I said, 'How do you mean, there'll be others? It's not a thing you see often along a bus route.'

'I was speaking in general terms,' she answered. 'Don't bother to talk, I like you silent best.'

It wasn't a slap on the face, the way she said it. Fact was, I

knew what she meant. Talking's all very pleasant with people like Mr and Mrs Thompson, over supper, and you say how the day has gone, and one of you reads a bit out of the paper, and the other says, 'Fancy, there now,' and so it goes on, in bits and pieces until one of you yawns, and somebody says, 'Who's for bed?' Or it's nice enough with a chap like the boss, having a cuppa mid-morning, or about three when there's nothing doing, 'I'll tell you what I think, those blokes in the government are making a mess of things, no better than the last lot,' and then we'll be interrupted with someone coming to fill up with petrol. And I like talking to my old Mum when I go and see her, which I don't do often enough, and she tells me how she spanked my bottom when I was a kid, and I sit on the kitchen table like I did then, and she bakes rock cakes and gives me peel, saying, 'You always were one for peel.' That's talk, that's conversation.

But I didn't want to talk to my girl. I just wanted to keep my arm round her the way I was doing, and rest my chin against her head, and that's what she meant when she said she liked me silent. I liked it too.

One last thing bothered me a bit, and that was whether I could kiss her before the bus stopped and we were turned out at the terminus. I mean, putting an arm round a girl is one thing, and kissing her is another. It takes a little time as a rule to warm up. You start off with a long evening ahead of you, and by the time you've been to a picture or a concert, and then had something to eat and to drink, well, you've got yourselves acquainted, and it's the usual thing to end up with a bit of kissing and a cuddle, the girls expect it. Truth to tell, I was never much of a one for kissing. There was a girl I walked out with back home, before I went into the army, and she was quite a good sort, I liked her. But her teeth were a bit prominent, and even if you shut your eyes and tried to forget who it was you were kissing, well, you knew it was her, and there was nothing to it. Good old Doris from next door. But the opposite kind are even worse, the ones that grab you and nearly eat you. You come across plenty of them, when you're in uniform. They're much too eager, and they muss you about, and you get the feeling they can't wait for a chap to get busy about them. I don't mind saying it used to make me

sick. Put me dead off, and that's a fact. I suppose I was born fussy. I don't know.

But now, this evening in the bus, it was all quite different. I don't know what it was about the girl - the sleepy eyes, and the copper hair, and somehow not seeming to care if I was there yet liking me at the same time; I hadn't found anything like this before. So I said to myself, 'Now, shall I risk it, or shall I wait?', and I knew, from the way the driver was going and the conductor was whistling below and saying 'goodnight' to the people getting off, that the final stop couldn't be far away; and my heart began to thump under my coat, and my neck grew hot below the collar - darn silly, only a kiss you know, she couldn't kill me - and then . . . It was like diving off a spring-board. I thought, 'Here goes,' and I bent down, and turned her face to me, and lifted her chin with my hand, and kissed her good and proper.

Well, if I was poetical, I'd say what happened then was a revelation. But I'm not poetical, and I can only say that she kissed me back, and it lasted a long time, and it wasn't a bit like Doris.

Then the bus stopped with a jerk, and the conductor called out in a sing-song voice, 'All out, please.' Frankly, I could have wrung his neck.

She gave me a kick on the ankle. 'Come on, move,' she said, and I stumbled from my seat and racketed down the stairs, she following behind, and there we were, standing in a street. It was beginning to rain too, not badly but just enough to make you notice and want to turn up the collar of your coat, and we were right at the end of a great wide street, with deserted unlighted shops on either side, the end of the world it looked to me, and sure enough there was a hill over to the left, and at the bottom of the hill a cemetery. I could see the railings and the white tombstones behind, and it stretched a long way, nearly half-way up the hill. There were acres of it.

'God darn it,' I said, 'is this the place you meant?'

'Could be,' she said, looking over her shoulder vaguely, and then she took my arm. 'What about a cup of coffee first?' she said.

First . . . ? I wondered if she meant before the long trudge home,



or was this home? It didn't really matter. It wasn't much after eleven. And I could do with a cup of coffee, and a sandwich too. There was a stall across the road, and they hadn't shut up shop.

We walked over to it, and the driver was there too, and the conductor, and the Air Force fellow who had been up in front on the top deck. They were ordering cups of tea and sandwiches, and we had the same, only coffee. They cut them tasty at the stalls, the sandwiches, I've noticed it before, nothing stingy about it, good slices of ham between thick white bread, and the coffee is piping hot, full cups too, good value, and I thought to myself 'Six bob will see this lot all right.'

I noticed my girl looking at the Air Force chap, sort of thoughtful-like, as though she might have seen him before, and he looked at her too. I couldn't blame him for that. I didn't mind either; when you're out with a girl it gives you a kind of pride if other chaps notice her. And you couldn't miss this one. Not my girl.

Then she turned her back on him, deliberate, and leant with her elbows on the stall, sipping her hot coffee, and I stood beside her doing the same. We weren't stuck up or anything, we were pleasant and polite enough, saying good evening all round, but anyone could tell that we were together, the girl and I, we were on our own. I liked that. Funny, it did something to me inside, gave me a protective feeling. For all they knew we might have been a married couple on our way home.

They were chaffing a bit, the other three and the chap serving the sandwiches and tea, but we didn't join in.

'You want to watch out, in that uniform,' said the conductor to the Air Force fellow, 'or you'll end up like those others. It's late too, to be out on your own.'

They all started laughing. I didn't quite see the point, but I supposed it was a joke.

'I've been awake a long time,' said the Air Force fellow. 'I know a bad lot when I see one.'

'That's what the others said, I shouldn't wonder,' remarked the driver, 'and we know what happened to them. Makes you shudder. But why pick on the Air Force, that's what I want to know?'

'It's the colour of our uniform,' said the fellow. 'You can spot it in the dark.'

They went on laughing in that way. I lighted up a cigarette, but my girl wouldn't have one.

'I blame the war for all that's gone wrong with the women,' said the coffee-stall bloke, wiping a cup and hanging it up behind. 'Turned a lot of them barmy, in my opinion. They don't know the difference between right or wrong.'

'Tisn't that, it's sport that's the trouble,' said the conductor. 'Develops their muscles and that, what weren't never meant to be developed. Take my two youngsters, f'r instance. The girl can knock the boy down any time, she's a proper little bully. Makes you think.'

'That's right,' agreed the driver, 'equality of the sexes, they call it, don't they? It's the vote that did it. We ought never to have given them the vote.'

'Garn,' said the Air Force chap, 'giving them the vote didn't turn the women barmy. They've always been the same, under the skin. The people out East know how to treat 'em. They keep 'em shut up, out there. That's the answer. Then you don't get any trouble.'

'I don't know what my old woman would say if I tried to shut her up,' said the driver. And they all started laughing again.

My girl plucked at my sleeve and I saw she had finished her coffee. She motioned with her head towards the street.

'Want to go home?' I said.

Silly. I somehow wanted the others to believe we were going home. She didn't answer. She just went striding off, her hands in the pockets of her mac. I said goodnight, and followed her, but not before I noticed the Air Force fellow staring after her over his cup of tea.

She walked off along the street, and it was still raining, dreary somehow, made you want to be sitting over a fire somewhere snug, and when she had crossed the street, and had come to the railings outside the cemetery she stopped, and looked up at me, and smiled.

'What now?' I said.

'Tombstones are flat,' she said, 'sometimes.'

'What if they are?' I asked, bewildered-like.

'You can lie down on them,' she said.

She turned and strolled along, looking at the railings, and then she came to one that was bent wide, and the next beside it broken, and she glanced up at me and smiled again.

'It's always the same,' she said. 'You're bound to find a gap if you look long enough.'

She was through that gap in the railings as quick as a knife through butter. You could have knocked me flat.

'Here, hold on,' I said, 'I'm not as small as you.'

But she was off and away, wandering among the graves. I got through the gap, puffing and blowing a bit, and then I looked around, and bless me if she wasn't lying on a long flat gravestone, with her arms under her head and her eyes closed.

Well, I wasn't expecting anything. I mean, it had been in my mind to see her home and that. Date her up for the next evening. Of course, seeing as it was late, we could have stopped a bit when we came to the doorway of her place. She needn't have gone in right away. But lying there on the gravestone wasn't hardly natural.

I sat down, and took her hand.

'You'll get wet lying there,' I said. Feeble, but I didn't know what else to say.

'I'm used to that,' she said.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. There was a street light not far away, outside the railings, so it wasn't all that dark, and anyway in spite of the rain the night wasn't pitch black, more murky somehow. I wish I knew how to tell about her eyes, but I'm not one for fancy talk. You know how a luminous watch shines in the dark. I've got one myself. When you wake up in the night, there it is on your wrist, like a friend. Somehow my girl's eyes shone like that, but they were lovely too. And they weren't lazy cat's eyes any more. They were loving and gentle, and they were sad, too, all at the same time.

'Used to lying in the rain?' I said.

'Brought up to it,' she answered. 'They gave us a name in the shelters. The dead-end kids, they used to call us, in the war days.'

'Weren't you never evacuated?' I asked.

'Not me,' she said. 'I never could stop any place. I always came back.'

'Parents living?'

'No. Both of them killed by the bomb that smashed my home.' She didn't speak tragic-like. Just ordinary.

'Bad luck,' I said.

She didn't answer that one. And I sat there, holding her hand, wanting to take her home.

'You been on your job some time, at the picture-house?' I asked.

'About three weeks,' she said. 'I don't stop anywhere long. I'll be moving on again soon.'

'Why's that?'

'Restless,' she said.

She put up her hands suddenly and took my face and held it. It was gentle the way she did it, not as you'd think.

'You've got a good kind face. I like it,' she said to me.

It was queer. The way she said it made me feel daft and soft, not sort of excited like I had been in the bus, and I thought to myself, well, maybe this is it, I've found a girl at last I really want. But not for an evening, casual. For going steady.

'Got a bloke?' I asked.

'No,' she said.

'I mean, regular.'

'No, never.'

It was a funny line of talk to be having in a cemetery, and she lying there like some figure carved on the old tombstone.

'I haven't got a girl either,' I said. 'Never think about it, the way other chaps do. Faddy, I guess. And then I'm keen on my job. Work in a garage, mechanic you know, repairs, anything that's going. Good pay. I've saved a bit, besides what I send my old Mum. I live in digs. Nice people, Mr and Mrs Thompson, and my boss at the garage is a nice chap too. I've never been lonely, and I'm not lonely now. But since I've seen you, it's made me think. You know, it's not going to be the same any more.'

She never interrupted once, and somehow it was like speaking my thoughts aloud.

'Going home to the Thompsons is all very pleasant and nice,' I said, 'and you couldn't wish for kinder people. Good grub too, and we chat a bit after supper, and listen to the wireless. But d'you know, what I want now is different. I want to come along and fetch you from the cinema, when the programme's over, and you'd be standing there by the curtains, seeing the people out, and you'd give me a bit of a wink to show me you'd be going through to change your clothes and I could wait for you. And then you'd come out into the street, like you did tonight, but you wouldn't go off on your own, you'd take my arm, and if you didn't want to wear your coat I'd carry it for you, or a parcel maybe, or whatever you had. Then we'd go off to the Corner House or some place for supper, handy. We'd have a table reserved - they'd know us, the waitresses and them; they'd keep back something special, just for us.'

I could picture it too, clear as anything. The table with the ticket on 'Reserved'. The waitress nodding at us, 'Got curried eggs tonight.' And we going through to get our trays, and my girl acting like she didn't know me, and me laughing to myself.

'D'you see what I mean?' I said to her. 'It's not just being friends, it's more than that.'

I don't know if she heard. She lay there looking up at me, touching my ear and my chin in that funny, gentle way. You'd say she was sorry for me.

'I'd like to buy you things,' I said, 'flowers sometimes. It's nice to see a girl with a flower tucked in her dress, it looks clean and fresh. And for special occasions, birthdays, Christmas, and that, something you'd seen in a shop window, and wanted, but hadn't liked to go in and ask the price. A brooch perhaps, or a bracelet, something pretty. And I'd go in and get it when you weren't with me, and it'd cost much more than my week's pay, but I wouldn't mind.'

I could see the expression on her face, opening the parcel. And she'd put it on, what I'd bought, and we'd go out together, and she'd be dressed up a bit for the purpose, nothing glaring I don't mean, but something that took the eye. You know, saucy.

'It's not fair to talk about getting married,' I said, 'not in these days, when everything's uncertain. A fellow doesn't mind

the uncertainty, but it's hard on a girl. Cooped up in a couple of rooms maybe, and queuing and rations and all. They like their freedom, and being in a job, and not being tied down, the same as us. But it's nonsense the way they were talking back in the coffee stall just now. About girls not being the same as in old days, and the war to blame. As for the way they treat them out East - I've seen some of it. I suppose that fellow meant to be funny, they're all smart Alicks in the Air Force, but it was a silly line of talk, I thought.'

She dropped her hands to her side and closed her eyes. It was getting quite wet there on the tombstone. I was worried for her, though she had her mac of course, but her legs and feet were damp in her thin stockings and shoes.

'You weren't ever in the Air Force, were you?' she said.

Queer. Her voice had gone quite hard. Sharp, and different. Like as if she was anxious about something, scared even.

'Not me,' I said, 'I served my time with REME. Proper lot they were. No swank, no nonsense. You know where you are with them.'

'I'm glad,' she said. 'You're good and kind. I'm glad.'

I wondered if she'd known some fellow in the RAF who had let her down. They're a wild crowd, the ones I've come across. And I remembered the way she'd looked at the boy drinking his tea at the stall. Reflective, somehow. As if she was thinking back. I couldn't expect her not to have been around a bit, with her looks, and then brought up to play about the shelters, without parents, like she said. But I didn't want to think of her being hurt by anyone.

'Why, what's wrong with them?' I said. 'What's the RAF done to you?'

'They smashed my home,' she said.

'That was the Germans, not our fellows.'

'It's all the same, they're killers, aren't they?' she said.

I looked down at her, lying on the tombstone, and her voice wasn't hard any more, like when she'd asked me if I'd been in the Air Force, but it was tired, and sad, and oddly lonely, and it did something queer to my stomach, right in the pit of it, so that I wanted to do the darndest silliest thing and take her home



with me, back to where I lived with Mr and Mrs Thompson, and say to Mrs Thompson – she was a kind old soul, she wouldn't mind – 'Look, this is my girl. Look after her.' Then I'd know she'd be safe, she'd be all right, nobody could do anything to hurt her. That was the thing I was afraid of suddenly, that someone would come along and hurt my girl.

I bent down and put my arms round her and lifted her up close.

'Listen,' I said, 'it's raining hard. I'm going to take you home. You'll catch your death, lying here on the wet stone.'

'No,' she said, her hands on my shoulders, 'nobody ever sees me home. You're going back where you belong, alone.'

'I won't leave you here,' I said.

'Yes, that's what I want you to do. If you refuse I shall be angry. You wouldn't want that, would you?'

I stared at her, puzzled. And her face was queer in the murky old light there, whiter than before, but it was beautiful, Jesus Christ, it was beautiful. That's blasphemy. But I can't say it no other way.

'What do you want me to do?' I asked.

'I want you to go and leave me here, and not look back,' she said, 'like someone dreaming, sleep-walking, they call it. Go back walking through the rain. It will take you hours. It doesn't matter, you're young and strong and you've got long legs. Go back to your room, wherever it is, and get into bed, and go to sleep, and wake and have your breakfast in the morning, and go off to work, the same as you always do.'

'What about you?'

'Never mind about me. Just go.'

'Can I call for you at the cinema tomorrow night? Can it be like what I was telling you, you know . . . going steady?'

She didn't answer. She only smiled. She sat quite still, looking in my face, and then she closed her eyes and threw back her head and said, 'Kiss me again, stranger.'

I left her, like she said. I didn't look back. I climbed through the railings of the cemetery, out on to the road. No one seemed to be about, and the coffee stall by the bus stop had closed down, the boards were up.

I started walking the way the bus had brought us. The road was straight, going on for ever. A High Street it must have been. There were shops on either side, and it was right away north-east of London, nowhere I'd ever been before. I was proper lost, but it didn't seem to matter. I felt like a sleep-walker, just as she said.

I kept thinking of her all the time. There was nothing else, only her face in front of me as I walked. They had a word for it in the army, when a girl gets a fellow that way, so he can't see straight or hear right or know what he's doing; and I thought it a lot of cock, or it only happened to drunks, and now I knew it was true and it had happened to me. I wasn't going to worry any more about how she'd get home; she'd told me not to, and she must have lived handy, she'd never have ridden out so far else, though it was funny living such a way from her work. But maybe in time she'd tell me more, bit by bit. I wouldn't drag it from her. I had one thing fixed in my mind, and that was to pick her up the next evening from the picture palace. It was firm and set, and nothing would budge me from that. The hours in between would just be a blank for me until ten p.m. came round.

I went on walking in the rain, and presently a lorry came along and I thumbed a lift, and the driver took me a good part of the way before he had to turn left in the other direction, and so I got down and walked again, and it must have been close on three when I got home.

I would have felt bad, in an ordinary way, knocking up Mr Thompson to let me in, and it had never happened before either, but I was all lit up inside from loving my girl, and I didn't seem to mind. He came down at last and opened the door. I had to ring several times before he heard, and there he was, grey with sleep, poor old chap, his pyjamas all crumpled from the bed.

'Whatever happened to you?' he said. 'We've been worried, the wife and me. We thought you'd been knocked down, run over. We came back here and found the house empty and your supper not touched.'

'I went to the pictures,' I said.

'The pictures?' He stared up at me, in the passage-way. 'The pictures stop at ten o'clock.'

'I know,' I said, 'I went walking after that. Sorry. Goodnight.'

And I climbed up the stairs to my room, leaving the old chap muttering to himself and bolting the door, and I heard Mrs Thompson calling from her bedroom, 'What is it? Is it him? Is he come home?'

I'd put them to trouble and to worry, and I ought to have gone in there and then and apologized, but I couldn't somehow, it wouldn't have come right; so I shut my door and threw off my clothes and got into bed, and it was like as if she was with me still, my girl, in the darkness.

They were a bit quiet at breakfast the next morning, Mr and Mrs Thompson. They didn't look at me. Mrs Thompson gave me my kipper without a word, and he went on looking at his newspaper.

I ate my breakfast, and then I said, 'I hope you had a nice evening up at Highgate?' and Mrs Thompson, with her mouth a bit tight, she said, 'Very pleasant, thank you, we were home by ten,' and she gave a little sniff and poured Mr Thompson out another cup of tea.

We went on being quiet, no one saying a word, and then Mrs Thompson said, 'Will you be in to supper this evening?' and I said, 'No, I don't think so, I'm meeting a friend,' and then I saw the old chap look at me over his spectacles.

'If you're going to be late,' he said, 'we'd best take the key for you.'

Then he went on reading his paper. You could tell they were proper hurt that I didn't tell them anything, or say where I was going.

I went off to work, and we were busy at the garage that day, one job after the other came along, and any other time I wouldn't have minded. I liked a full day and often worked overtime, but today I wanted to get away before the shops closed; I hadn't thought about anything else since the idea came into my head.

It was getting on for half past four, and the boss came to me and said, 'I promised the doctor he'd have his Austin this evening, I said you'd be through with it by seven-thirty. That's OK, isn't it?'

My heart sank. I'd counted on getting off early, because of

what I wanted to do. Then I thought quickly that if the boss let me off now, and I went out to the shop before it closed, and came back again to do the job on the Austin, it would be all right, so I said, 'I don't mind working a bit of overtime, but I'd like to slip out now, for half an hour, if you're going to be here. There's something I want to buy before the shops shut.'

He told me that suited him, so I took off my overalls and washed and got my coat and I went off to the line of shops down at the bottom of Haverstock Hill. I knew the one I wanted. It was a jeweller's, where Mr Thompson used to take his clock to be repaired, and it wasn't a place where they sold trash at all, but good stuff, solid silver frames and that, and cutlery.

There were rings, of course, and a few fancy bangles, but I didn't like the look of them. All the girls in the NAAFI used to wear bangles with charms on them, quite common it was, and I went on staring in at the window and then I spotted it, right at the back.

It was a brooch. Quite small, not much bigger than your thumbnail, but with a nice blue stone on it and a pin at the back, and it was shaped like a heart. That was what got me, the shape. I stared at it a bit, and there wasn't a ticket to it, which meant it would cost a bit, but I went in and asked to have a look at it. The jeweller got it out of the window for me, and he gave it a bit of a polish and turned it this way and that, and I saw it pinned on my girl, showing up nice on her frock or her jumper, and I knew this was it.

'I'll take it,' I said, and then asked him the price.

I swallowed a bit when he told me, but I took out my wallet and counted the notes, and he put the heart in a box wrapped up careful with cotton wool, and made a neat package of it, tied with fancy string. I knew I'd have to get an advance from the boss before I went off work that evening, but he was a good chap and I was certain he'd give it to me.

I stood outside the jeweller's, with the packet for my girl safe in my breast pocket, and I heard the church clock strike a quarter to five. There was time to slip down to the cinema and make sure she understood about the date for the evening, and then I'd beat it fast up the road and get back to the garage, and I'd have

the Austin done by the time the doctor wanted it.

When I got to the cinema my heart was beating like a sledgehammer and I could hardly swallow. I kept picturing to myself how she'd look, standing there by the curtains going in, with the velvet jacket and the cap on the back of her head.

There was a bit of a queue outside, and I saw they'd changed the programme. The poster of the western had gone, with the cowboy throwing a knife in the Indian's guts, and they had instead a lot of girls dancing, and some chap prancing in front of them with a walking-stick. It was a musical.

I went in, and didn't go near the box office but looked straight to the curtains, where she'd be. There was an usherette there all right, but it wasn't her. This was a great tall girl, who looked silly in the clothes, and she was trying to do two things at once - tear off the slips of tickets as the people went past, and hang on to her torch at the same time.

I waited a moment. Perhaps they'd switched over positions and my girl had gone up to the circle. When the last lot had got in through the curtains and there was a pause and she was free, I went up to her and I said, 'Excuse me, do you know where I could have a word with the other young lady?'

She looked at me. 'What other young lady?'

'The one who was here last night, with copper hair,' I said.

She looked at me closer then, suspicious-like.

'She hasn't shown up today,' she said. 'I'm taking her place.'

'Not shown up?'

'No. And it's funny you should ask. You're not the only one. The police was here not long ago. They had a word with the manager, and the commissioner too, and no one's said anything to me yet, but I think there's been trouble.'

My heart beat different then. Not excited, bad. Like when someone's ill, took to hospital, sudden.

'The police?' I said. 'What were they here for?'

'I told you, I don't know,' she answered, 'but it was something to do with her, and the manager went with them to the police station, and he hasn't come back yet. This way, please, circle on the left, stalls to the right.'

I just stood there, not knowing what to do. It was like as if the floor had been knocked away from under me.

The tall girl tore another slip off a ticket and then she said to me, over her shoulder, 'Was she a friend of yours?'

'Sort of,' I said. I didn't know what to say.

'Well, if you ask me, she was queer in the head, and it wouldn't surprise me if she'd done away with herself and they'd found her dead. No, ice-creams served in the interval, after the news reel.'

I went out and stood in the street. The queue was growing for the cheaper seats, and there were children too, talking, excited. I brushed past them and started walking up the street, and I felt sick inside, queer. Something had happened to my girl. I knew it now. That was why she had wanted to get rid of me last night, and for me not to see her home. She was going to do herself in, there in the cemetery. That's why she talked funny and looked so white, and now they'd found her, lying there on the gravestone by the railings.

If I hadn't gone away and left her she'd have been all right. If I'd stayed with her just five minutes longer, coaxing her, I'd have got her round to my way of thinking and seen her home, standing no nonsense, and she'd be at the picture palace now, showing the people to their seats.

It might be it wasn't as bad as what I feared. It might be she was found wandering, lost her memory and got picked up by the police and taken off, and then they found out where she worked and that, and now the police wanted to check up with the manager at the cinema to see if it was so. If I went down to the police station and asked them there, maybe they'd tell me what had happened, and I could say she was my girl, we were walking out, and it wouldn't matter if she didn't recognize me even, I'd stick to the story. I couldn't let down my boss, I had to get that job done on the Austin, but afterwards, when I'd finished, I could go down to the police station.

All the heart had gone out of me, and I went back to the garage hardly knowing what I was doing, and for the first time ever the smell of the place turned my stomach, the oil and the grease, and



there was a chap roaring up his engine, before backing out his car, and a great cloud of smoke coming from his exhaust, filling the workshop with stink.

I went and got my overalls, and put them on, and fetched the tools, and started on the Austin, and all the time I was wondering what it was that had happened to my girl, if she was down at the police station, lost and lonely, or if she was lying somewhere . . . dead. I kept seeing her face all the time like it was last night.

It took me an hour and a half, not more, to get the Austin ready for the road, filled up with petrol and all, and I had her facing outwards to the street for the owner to drive out, but I was all in by then, dead tired, and the sweat pouring down my face. I had a bit of a wash and put on my coat, and I felt the package in the breast pocket. I took it out and looked at it, done so neat with the fancy ribbon, and I put it back again, and I hadn't noticed the boss come in - I was standing with my back to the door.

'Did you get what you wanted?' he said, cheerful-like and smiling.

He was a good chap, never out of temper, and we got along well.

'Yes,' I said.

But I didn't want to talk about it. I told him the job was done and the Austin was ready to drive away. I went to the office with him so that he could note down the work done, and the overtime, and he offered me a fag from the packet lying on his desk beside the evening paper.

'I see Lady Luck won the three-thirty,' he said. 'I'm a couple of quid up this week.'

He was entering my work in his ledger, to keep the pay-roll right.

'Good for you,' I said.

'Only backed it for a place, like a clot,' he said. 'She was twenty-five to one. Still, it's all in the game.'

I didn't answer. I'm not one for drinking, but I needed one bad, just then. I mopped my forehead with my handkerchief. I wished he'd get on with the figures, and say goodnight, and let me go.

'Another poor devil's had it,' he said. 'That's the third now in

three weeks, ripped right up the guts, same as the others. He died in hospital this morning. Looks like there's a hoodoo on the RAF.'

'What was it, flying jets?' I asked.

'Jets?' he said. 'No, damn it, murder. Sliced up the belly, poor sod. Don't you ever read the papers? It's the third one in three weeks, done identical, all Air Force fellows, and each time they've found 'em near a graveyard or a cemetery. I was saying just now, to that chap who came in for petrol, it's not only men who go off their rockers and turn sex maniacs, but women too. They'll get this one all right though, you see. It says in the paper they've a line on her, and expect an arrest shortly. About time too, before another poor blighter cops it.'

He shut up his ledger and stuck his pencil behind his ear.

'Like a drink?' he said. 'I've got a bottle of gin in the cupboard.'

'No,' I said, 'no, thanks very much. I've . . . I've got a date.'

'That's right,' he said, smiling, 'enjoy yourself.'

I walked down the street and bought an evening paper. It was like what he said about the murder. They had it on the front page. They said it must have happened about two a.m. Young fellow in the Air Force, in north-east London. He had managed to stagger to a call-box and get through to the police, and they found him there on the floor of the box when they arrived.

He made a statement in the ambulance before he died. He said a girl called to him, and he followed her, and he thought it was just a bit of love-making - he'd seen her with another fellow drinking coffee at a stall a little while before - and he thought she'd thrown this other fellow over and had taken a fancy to him, and then she got him, he said, right in the guts.

It said in the paper that he had given the police a full description of her, and it said also that the police would be glad if the man who had been seen with the girl earlier in the evening would come forward to help in identification.

I didn't want the paper any more. I threw it away. I walked about the streets till I was tired, and when I guessed Mr and Mrs Thompson had gone to bed I went home, and groped for the key



they'd left on a piece of string hanging inside the letterbox, and I let myself in and went upstairs to my room.

Mrs Thompson had turned down the bed and put a thermos of tea for me, thoughtful-like, and the evening paper, the late edition.

They'd got her. About three o'clock in the afternoon. I didn't read the writing, nor the name nor anything. I sat down on my bed, and took up the paper, and there was my girl staring up at me from the front page.

Then I took the package from my coat and undid it, and threw away the wrapper and the fancy string, and sat there looking down at the little heart I held in my hand.